

***- House to Pass Hall Co-sponsored Legislation to Bring All Security Contractors Under U.S. Law -***

***- Hall: "Our Unprecedented Use of Unaccountable Private Security Contractors is One of the Most Dangerous and Destabilizing Aspects of Our Military Involvement in Iraq" -***

Washington, DC - U.S. Representative John Hall (D-NY19) spoke on the House floor this morning in support of legislation to hold private security contractors in war zones overseas accountable for criminal behavior.

"Our unprecedented use of unaccountable private security contractors is one of the most dangerous and destabilizing aspects of our military involvement in Iraq," said Hall. "These contractors currently operate largely outside both U.S. and Iraqi law, raising animosity toward American troops and civilians in the field and losing us hearts and minds in Iraq."

In 2000, Congress passed the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act (MEJA), which gave U.S. courts jurisdiction over contractors in war zones overseas, but only if they are on contract with the Department of Defense. This has left a large loophole, with contractors working in war zones overseas for the State Department or other agencies apparently not subject to U.S. court jurisdiction, meaning there has been no clear way to hold them accountable. This loophole is now enormous. There are currently more than 1,000 private security contractors working for the State Department in Iraq, including 861 Blackwater employees, potentially none of whom are legally accountable for any wrongdoing.

Later today the House is expected to pass H.R. 2740, Holding Private Security Contractors in War Zones Overseas Accountable for Criminal Behavior. Hall is a co-sponsor of the measure. This bill will close the loophole left by the 2000 MEJA Act, ensuring that all private security contractors in war zones overseas will be held accountable for any criminal behavior. It gives U.S. federal courts jurisdiction over the actions by contractors working for any U.S. government agency in areas of foreign countries where U.S. military forces are conducting combat operations. Specifically, the measure subjects employees of all such contractors to the same jurisdiction established by the MEJA Act.

"We need to stop sending contractors to Iraq and bring those there under control," said Hall. "There is no excuse for the de facto legal immunity that our government has permitted for tens of thousands of armed private individuals working on our country's behalf in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. government has a responsibility to hold the individuals carrying out its work to the highest standards of conduct, and to ensure that these individuals protect human life and uphold the law. This responsibility does not disappear simply because such individuals are contractors instead of government employees."

Last week Hall introduced H.R. 3695, The Freeze Private Contractors in Iraq Act, which would prevent increases in the number of private security contractors operating in Iraq. Hall's bill would prohibit federal agencies from entering into contracts that would increase the number of private security contractors in Iraq above the number present in Iraq on September 1, 2007.

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